



mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 5
Number 1

Article 1

5-15-1978

The *War of the Rings* Treelogy: An Elegy for Lost Innocence and Wonder

Stephen L. Walker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Walker, Stephen L. (1978) "The *War of the Rings* Treelogy: An Elegy for Lost Innocence and Wonder," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol5/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



Mythcon 51: A VIRTUAL “HALFLING” MYTHCON

July 31 - August 1, 2021 (Saturday and Sunday)

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-51.htm>



Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm>

Abstract

Review of trees in the Middle-earth legendarium, from Telperion and Laurelin to Treebeard. Argues that throughout the history of Arda, the practice of art and agriculture have negative consequences, constituting as they do distance and alienation from the original creation.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Trees; Trees in J.R.R. Tolkien

The War of the Rings Treelogy:

An Elegy for Lost Innocence and Wonder

by Stephen L. Walker

Trees are axiological to the aesthetic, ethic, and metaphysic of J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth; and his masterwork may be fairly called a Treelogy. That Middle-earthling propriety dictates a child-like innocence and a wonder at Nature is evidenced by an indictment of creature duplication of Nature, for murder, and interference with Nature, for alienation. Creatures are beset with traumas, crises, and travail because they have presumed into the province of the Makers by practicing art and agriculture.

Eru and the Valar created Middle-earth, and it was good and bright and beautiful. Then Eru created elves and men, making them like himself and the Valar in that they were free to do as they would. Creature doom was simple: stewardship would bring peace and plenty and contentment; but possession, war and want and worry. Then Eru, seeing that what was was ample, withdrew.

The Valar named their home, the westernmost of lands, Valinor. From Valimar, that part of Valinor west of the Pelori, through Calacirya, flowed eastward the Light of the Two Trees, Laurelin and Telperion. Here Middle-earth was most beautiful.

Telperion, the elder of the Two, was the eldest of all trees. Like the moon and the stars, it was silver. Laurelin, which was the color of the sun, and Telperion were at once the Tree of Life, the Tree of Knowledge, and the Burning Bush; for life, light, knowledge, and grace, the Maker's nurturing and sustaining presence, were their fruit. Complements, they were the reciprocal energies that counterbalanced each other cyclicly in the continuation of what we now call substance through space and time.

All was well until Fëanor, one of the Noldor and the greatest elven artisan of all time, made *silima* and fashioned the *silmarilli* and thereby set into motion the beginnings of what became the Fall of Morgoth, an important Vala, and the birth of the first evil in Middle-earth.

Originally, all things made had been made by Eru and the Valar; but with the Noldor came "improvements" upon Nature in the forms of the *palantiri*, the *silmarilli*, and the *Tengwar*. Each of these inventions was flawed in that each of them was an imitation of something much greater. The *palantiri* brought pictures to the mind's eye, pictures of past, present, and possible reality. The *silmarilli* transfigured the living light of Laurelin and Telperion in cold crystal. The *Tengwar*, words written, robbed the spoken word of those subtle nuances that give it life. All three were second-generation wonders that, by comparison with what they duplicated, came off as lifeless and sad.

It seems that the exercise of art initiates in creatures, or perhaps only makes them recognize, the want to control that which they imitate. The making of artifacts seems to confirm the existence of some flaw in creatures. Perhaps this is what is at the very heart of the notion of *hubris*, a creature's overstepping into the province of the Makers. As is always the case, the Noldor's innovations were meant to be used only for good purposes; but, as is always also the case, they were misused, as power of this nature is always misused. Art pretends to give creatures power over Nature in that it deludes them into thinking that they can reshape Nature according to their own vision. Power might be called the "art" of conforming Na-

ture to the will of a creature. The result of this is tragedy.

The *silmarilli* proved too strong a temptation for Morgoth. Had Fëanor not fashioned them, would Morgoth have dared poison the Trees? Probably not, for the Trees themselves were fountains of Life, the living, shining immanence of Eru in creation. Yet the temptation to arrogate their second-hand light proved too strong a lure for him. The growing, living Trees were in the Public Domain; but the jewels, as a private treasure trove, were stealable. Greed got its start because Nature was duplicated in a form that could be claimed by anyone with the will and sufficient force to do so. Once a simple creature could arrogate a distillation of the most beautiful in Nature, then Nature itself became second-best.

Morgoth could not enjoy the jewels in Valinor, so he exiled himself and bred orcs and trolls for company; and he reared them in his will. In his own damning evil he schooled them, and he taught them to kill trees. His sacrilege is duplicated on a lesser scale by lesser creatures and is an alerting signal to the good, of otherwise unknown evil.

Some of the Noldor, notably Fëanor, Galadriel, and Celebrimbor, against the wishes of the Valar, returned to Middle-earth to try to rescue the jewels. One was recovered, but the other two were lost forever. Fëanor perished because his inordinate pride, marked by his disobedience to the Valar, had decreed his doom. Morgoth perished because his evil, strong though it was, was no match for the good he affronted. Inherent in evil is separation from good, but good is also life. Thus evil unwittingly defeats itself by separating itself from life.

The Valar did not permit the one recovered *silmaril* to be returned to Middle-earth. Instead, they set it in the heavens as the Evenstar. It is called Earendil's star because it is mounted on the prow of his ship which sails the heavens forever. The Valar made sure that its light would remain public by setting it out of the reach of creatures. It is there, free for all who have the eyes to see it; but it is also, sadly, forever remote from Middle-earth.

Morgoth killed the parents of all trees. Laurelin was lost forever, but a sapling of Telperion survived. It was called Galathilion, and it did not shine. As earth aged and peoples spread, creation grew away from primordial goodness both in space and in time. Murder and other evils were abroad. The Light of the Presence of Eru had been extinguished, and its closest approximation made remote by the Guardians. Galathilion grew in Eressea, an island once removed from Valinor.

Westernmost of the mortal lands was Elenna, and on Elenna grew Nimloth which was a descendant of Galathilion. Elenna had been given to the Edain, the Dunedain, for their part in the battle against Morgoth. The Dunedain called Elenna, Numenor. From Numenor, Isildur carried a sapling of Nimloth to Minas Anor, later re-named Minas Tirith, where the tree which sprouted had no individual name of its own but was called simply The White Tree.

Each successive removal of Telperion's descendants from Valinor witnesses a degeneration. Galathilion did not shine; but the Eldar of Eressea were immortal and remembered Telperion. Nimloth was less to men, for they were less. They were mortal and Elenna was farther from Calacirian. The

White Tree of Gondor is still a talismanic link with the West, but the tree does not shine and its identity is generic rather than specific. Its distance in time and space from the First Days in Valinor reflects man's distance from Genesis.

The White Tree is the West's approbation of right rule in Gondor. While the Tree flourishes, Gondor, rightful authority, and the king flourishes. When the king dies, Gondor declines and the Tree withers. When the Great Plague ravages Gondor and King Telemar dies, TA 1636, the White Tree dies. In TA 1640 King Tarondor ascends to the throne and plants a seedling. Gondor flourishes until TA 2852 when Belecthor II dies. The White Tree dies and no sapling can be found until Gandalf leads Aragorn to the sapling on the slopes of Mindoullin in TA 3019.

Aragorn finding the White Tree is Aragorn finding himself. Newborns, Aragorn and his double, the Tree, are one. Gandalf, the guide from the West, leads Aragorn to the West's token of approval. Gandalf, a Guardian and a steward, crowns and recrowns Aragorn. For years the seed had remained hidden, unknown, in the cold, as Aragorn had spent years hidden in Rivendell and wandering anonymously in the North. (Aragorn means "man of the tree" or "royal tree.") Aragorn comes into his kingdom and he weds Arwen. The tree blossoms and they have children. Gondor flourishes.

Aragorn and the Tree are the best of the West that survives in the East. The Two Trees are dead, and their descendants do not shine. Isildur and Anarion are dead, and Aragorn is only a shadow of them. The heroic age has passed. The world is winding down.

Gondor is recognized by the West as one center of civilization. The White Tree is one axis about which a kingdom and a people revolve. The other tree that links Middle-earth with the West is the Mallorn in the Party Field in Hobbiton. The Mallorn in the Shire came to be known as the New Party Tree because it replaced the tree under which Bilbo disappeared after his 111th birthday party.

The history of the Party Trees parallels that of the White Tree. Saruman's lackeys had felled trees throughout the Shire while the four hobbits were away South. They had probably felled the Old Party Tree just after imprisoning Will Whitfoot. Whitfoot, significantly the first hobbit put into the Lockholds by Sharkey's men, was the Mayor of Michael Delving, and, as such, the representative of rightful authority in the Shire. The tree is killed, the mayor imprisoned, and the Shire ravaged. (Recall that in SA 3429 Sauron had attacked Gondor and burned the White Tree. Sauron, a servant of Morgoth, had repeated Morgoth's sin, as does Saruman.)

Sam returns to the Shire after the war and is heartbroken at seeing so many trees destroyed. He remembers Galadriel's Parting Gift and is soon replanting the Shire. It is the seed that Galadriel gave him that he plants where the Old Party Tree had stood.

The Mallorn is a species that seems to have grown, until this time, only in Lothlorien. Galadriel sings of having dreamt of "golden leaves" and "golden leaves there were . . . in Eldamar." Perhaps Mellyrn grew there too, but Haldir says, "if there are mallorn-trees beyond the Great Sea, none have reported it." Lothlorien itself is an enchanted realm created by the power of Galadriel, focused through the Ring of Adamant, Nenya, given her by Celebrimbor.

First Feanor made the *silmarilli*, then Celebrimbor forged the rings which furnished Sauron with the necessary background material for the making of the One Ring. Again elven artisanship is linked with the temptation of other creatures.

Nenya "glittered like polished gold overlaid with silver light (silver and gold), and a white-stone twinkled in it as if the Even-star had come down to rest upon her hand . . . The power of the lady is on . . . Caras Galadon, where Galadriel wields the Elven ring." The silver boled and golden leafed Mellyrn were, therefore, Galadriel's

best efforts at bringing the gold and silver light of Earendil's star down to life on Middle-earth.

The phial that Galadriel gives Frodo breaks the spell of the Watchers and subdues Shelob. It is filled with the water of Galadriel's mirror which captures the light of Earendil's star. The thread of Calcirian Light dispelling darkness and inspiring perseverance toward rebirth is woven throughout history and is still the warp and weft of the metaphysical cloth of the Middle-earth of the Fourth Age.

When Sam returns he plants the seed, becomes Mayor, and restores order. The seedling sprouts and Sam marries Rosie. The tree blossoms and Rosie and Sam have children. The Shire flourishes and burgeons trees. What the White Tree is to Aragorn, the New Party Tree is to Sam.

The Mallorn preserves the memory of Lorien in the Shire. As shelter, it had protected and housed the Galadrim. It had preserved *lembas*, way bread, which was wrapped in it. The Mallorn, in preserving way bread, preserves the staff of life, bread, and therefore, life itself.

Sam, with the earth of Galadriel's orchard, re-trees the Shire. In this role he resembles, parallels, Treebeard, who is a treeherd. As no one in the wide world cares for trees as Treebeard does, so does no one in the Shire care for trees as Sam does. Sam, as Mayor, is the steward of the Shire. Treebeard, as *the Ent*, is the steward of all trees.

Treebeard is eldest, and Ents are the oldest living species in Middle-earth. Ents not only care for the forest itself but also protect other creatures from its evils. Treebeard is the natural Middle-earthly parallel to the Two Trees; or, he and Fimbrelthil are the natural counter-characters to the Two Trees. Sadly, there is only one of each remaining.

In the beginning, there were entwines as well as ents; and their children they called entings. Together they strolled through the woods and sang to the trees; and the trees responded to their love and attention. Their joy overflowed, and in language, taught them by the elves, they awakened to consciousness other communicative life in Nature. They became the vehicle through which elves, men, wizards, and hobbits could speak directly with Nature.

The ents are the reservoir of the past. They *are* lore. Their language *is* history, and their eyes are the visible wells of what has gone by. Their separation parallels our separation from Nature, and all unnatural separations. Treebeard's eyes twinkle, star-like, with joy, at times; but also, at times, Merry and Pippin see that deep within those still waters runs a vein of sorrow. Treebeard has ever present within himself the consciousness of his separation from Fimbrelthil, an abiding awareness of incompleteness. He looks toward the day when he and Fimbrelthil will once again walk together in a land where they can both be content.

There is an enigmatic parallel paradox here. Man, too, separates himself, or is separated from, his wombs; and man longs to return. Man is born, individuates himself, leaves home, and then spends his life longing to return to an at-onement with Nature; but his and Nature's ways are parted. Treebeard is little interested in wars and the ways of men; and other creatures, even elves, care little for the forests as Treebeard does. The forest itself has become divided into small patches, and not all the patches are good.

This separation of ways began with the ents themselves. The entwines became restless and discontent with the forest. They wanted the trees to listen to them and to obey them, for they desired order and wanted things to remain where they had put them. This notion was incompatible with the Ents' idea of freedom, so the entwines left the forest and went to the plains and prairies and began gardening. There they tamed Nature and, in a sense, they tamed man; for they taught man agriculture, which enabled him to settle down, and, in turn, to order Nature.

The elves gave man art and the entwives agriculture. Both gifts catalyzed civilization and culture, but both fraught sorrow and danger. They galvanized man against primordial Nature and enabled him to stand alone, apart, and aloof from it; but they teased him into arrogance. Agriculture is imbued with the notion of rightful authority. Authority is present in herding flocks, but much of the unpredictable and adventurous is still present in the nomadic life of the herdsman. Authority that constrains Nature into garden rows portends the commanding of soldiers into ranks of human vegetables who will respond without thinking. Righteous authority may be right, but it is also sad; and it is dangerous.

As harvester, the cultivator pretended that he was not of Nature, but *over* it; and, therefore, not contingent upon it, but it upon him. Art and agriculture are bittersweet ironies, blessings and curses. Men paint pictures of trees and write about trees to make an "art" more precious than trees themselves. Man clears forests to make way for grain fields and housing tracts. We prefer bland, pabulum-like, insecticided vegetables from distant gardens to the fresh, wild fruits that we might, if we dared, prog for ourselves. It galls us to *have* to use insecticides and artificial fertilizers in order to feed all the people on earth, to have to control nature in order to survive.

Treebeard would not coerce trees, or entwives, or hobbits, or ents. Old Man Willow was not so reticent. Treebeard and Old Man Willow show us the good and the evil possible in Nature and ourselves. Each is the conscience and consciousness of his respective forest, and each communicates with the world outside himself and causes that world to re-evaluate itself.

Old Man Willow, though potentially mobile and probably an ent with a bad heart, roots himself and stagnates. He uses speech as Saruman does, to spellbind. With monolithic malice he contorts the Old Forest and makes it force the hobbits toward him. His arms, willow limbs, have wrapped -- rapt -- him up in himself; and he is festering in his own rot. He drones a paralyzing dirge that literally makes drones of his captives and engulfs them as his body does. He does not use his legs to convey him about, but to try to drown Frodo.

Treebeard, on the other hand, is a delightful gadabout. He gossips, and exhorts, and educates, awakening the hobbits to trees and the ents to Saruman's evil. He arouses the ents, yet he restrains himself from intruding upon their wills.

When Merry and Pippin first meet him, they recall their near calamity with Old Man Willow and wonder whether their meeting with Treebeard will repeat it, but Treebeard allays their fears. He looks them in the eye and tells them that he will do nothing to them but that they might all do something together. A world parent, as Father Nature, he carries them in his arms as babes and later nurtures them to adulthood with draughts that in-

crease their stature. As the Senior Citizen he inspects and certifies their credentials, asking and answering questions with them. Delighted, he presents them personally to his peers and sponsors their species for inclusion in the Old List.

Earlier, the hobbits were embarrassed when in the company of the recognized species. Boromir represented the wide world when he guffawed Bilbo's offer to carry the Ring to Orodruin. Each time the hobbits had been introduced to the older, seemingly jaded peoples, they had been underrated as *halflings*. Treebeard, awakened by the hobbits, is representative of the world's awakening to and by them. There is more in them, and in the world, than meets the eye. Treebeard sees this in them and they, through him, see this in Nature.

As equal citizens with an equity in the future, they offer their service to the lords of the world. Theoden, receptive to wonder, respects Merry, awakens Merry; and Merry, awakened, preserves Eowyn by breaking the spell which knits the Nazgul together. Pippin's preserving Faramir from Denethor's madness parallel's Merry's experience of wonder begetting wonder and is another example of innocence's ontological primitiveness revealing its righteous ascendancy over malice and the madness resultant from a creature's overweening pride.

Since the entwives have departed, Treebeard has had to incorporate both female and male traits. Ents no longer mature from entings; they metamorphose from trees. Huorns are the adolescent ents of the present. Huorns exist in that twilight between dumbness and full enthood. They walk and talk and play their part in the war; but they are wild, wild even by Treebeard's standards. Huorns are growing both ways, into and out of enthood. Nature, in the ents, is divided and confused, wild; but Nature endures. It too is sad, yet it perseveres.

Tolkien, like Treebeard, does not offer answers. He *merely* articulates questions that arouse us and challenge us. Having come a long way from Fangorn Forest and speaking with Treebeard, we awaken to find our selves perverted. We raze forests to build houses and then plant trees to shade and protect our houses which are tree skeletons.

We find ourselves Morgothian in our mad repetition of the primeval prime evil, defoliating trees in our Viet-Nams, destroying villages in order to save them, and spiraling our defense budgets higher and higher. We are ordering each other about from isolated, polarized islands of alienation. Estranged from our selves, and our neighbor selves, we crave the First Days when we were one in awe of Nature and of ourselves in our appropriate place within it, when we were innocent, and equal, and wonderfilled.

There is hope for our return to that childlikeness, for Galadriel, of the Noldor, has given us, the Sams of the Fourth Age, our Age, no trinkets or baubles of elven artisanship, but, simply, a seed, The Seed, and some soil of an earlier Middle-earth in which to nurture it.

